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Bringing Comic Books to Class

History of the Comic Strip by David Kunzle; Adult Comics: An Introduction by Roger Sabin; Comics & Sequential Art by Will Eisner; Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud  
Review by: George Dardess

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# REVIEW

## BRINGING COMIC BOOKS TO CLASS

George Dardess

- David Kunzle. *History of the Comic Strip. Volume 1: The Early Comic Strip*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973. 477 pages, \$70. *Volume 2: The Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989. 391 pages, \$120.00.
- Roger Sabin. *Adult Comics: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1993. 256 pages, \$15.95.
- Will Eisner. *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985; revised, 1990. 158 pages, \$18.95.
- Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics*. Princeton, WI: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993. 216 pages, \$19.95.

If you've ever sent an adolescent in your household off to college—or anywhere else “in the world”—you'll be able to appreciate the attitude of us advocates of the “graphic novel” or “adult comic” or “sequential art narrative.” The uncertainty about how to name this new art form is symptomatic not only of the form's rawness but also of our anxiety that the form make the best impression possible. Will “graphic novel” make others think the form is somehow lewd or violent? And if that's what they think of “graphic novel,” will “adult comic” reassure them, with its porn-shop ambiance? But doesn't “sequential art narrative” go to the opposite extreme of overdressing the form, as if one were forcing ill-fitting formal clothing on a kid who has worn till now only jeans and T-shirts? Not even the success of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus*, with its eleven weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list, can ease our worry, for *Maus* is a graphic memoir, not a graphic novel. But again, isn't “graphic” a misleading term?

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During such moments of trial we parents and advocates would do well, if we can manage it, to step back a moment and scrutinize the object of our worry. Shouldn't we know our child thoroughly first, before tinkering with others' expectations? And shouldn't we begin by deciding on a name for our child, a name that has the virtue of relative accuracy, even if it lacks elegance and simplicity? Thus prompted by our consciences to speak with modest restraint, we note that today's sequential art narrative—for that name seems most fitting, or least unfitting—is a serious story (fictional most often, but not always) told in comics form. It is no longer a comic book, even though it employs many techniques used in comic book art. Like opera, the theater, the cinema, or video, it uses at least two mediums simultaneously, in this case words and pictures, to give aesthetic shape to human experience. The only important general characteristic the sequential art narrative form lacks that opera and the others share is respectability.

At this point all restraint is lost as we advocates throw protective arms around our maligned offspring. Lack of respectability indeed! What about the forms with which the sequential art narrative is invidiously compared? Oh, they give themselves airs all right, but one doesn't have to look very far in the historical record to find that each one has disreputable ancestors, that each one has had to fight against the demeaning and sometimes virulent prejudices of religious authorities and highbrows. Didn't the Puritans close the theaters? Wasn't the text-only novel once regarded with aristocratic disgust? And now champions of these forms, aligning themselves with the upper crust, have the gall to turn up their noses at the new kid on the block. It isn't fair!

Not only do these *arrivistes* conveniently forget their own history, they know nothing, or pretend to know nothing, of the sequential art narrative's own illustrious past. For can't the sequential art narrative's bloodlines be traced back to the dawn of civilization? Cave paintings used pictures to tell stories. The earliest scripts, in China, Sumeria, and Egypt, used pictures to represent ideas. The Mayans and other Meso-Americans developed a sophisticated language incorporating pictorial and syllabic elements. In Western traditions, too, we can find, or invent, very respectable ancestors of the sequential art narrative: in the Bayeux tapestry, for example, and later in the cartoons of Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and other masters, and in the blending of words and pictorial art in William Blake. The line of descent is clear, and our contemporary sequential art narrative can go forth with head held high, confident that it can put the detractors in their places.

Donald Kunzle in his excellent two-volume *History of the Comic Strip*, is skeptical. Wry, intelligent, and indefatigable in his pursuit of the sequential art narrative's forebears in museums and private collections throughout Europe and the United States, in his introduction to Volume 1 Kunzle is scornful of efforts "to ennoble [the 'comic strip's'] ancestry by means of great 'monuments' from the entire history of art" (2). Although Kunzle employs the term "comic strip" to

refer to narrative stories in picture form, he is not happy with the term. It is misleading since the comic strip “does not emerge until pictorial propaganda and the social cartoon become entirely comic in style, that is, in late eighteenth century England” (1). He prefers instead “‘narrative strip’ or ‘narrative sequence,’ ‘picture story’ or ‘pictorial sequence’ (depending on the format involved) in order to stress the *narrative* role of the medium,” which for him is primary (1). Yet the quotation marks Kunzle places around his preferred terms indicate the difficulty noted above: we do not possess a completely accurate, comprehensive name for our art form. “Sequential art narrative” barely stretches to fit the work Kunzle is covering. For what he exhaustively catalogues and describes in Volume 1 of his *History* is the broadsheet: a single large page presenting highly moral and often propagandistic visual tales vividly depicting punishments for vice and political corruption. Such broadsheets were made possible by the invention of printing in the German countries during the fifteenth century. Only in the eighteenth century does the “comic strip” truly become comic, though its moral message is still strong (as in Hogarth). In the nineteenth century the “comic strip” passes from the broadsheet format into the periodical press. There many of its now familiar techniques, such as its ways of animating characters’ gestures and expressions, are established by Rodolphe Töpffer and Wilhelm Busch, among others. Yet the form tends to languish as a humorous sub-genre, of interest primarily to children and the uneducated.

To us sequential art narrative advocates, Kunzle’s work—a third volume, on the American comic strip, is threatened—is a hard blow indeed. Propagandistic impulses to puff the sequential art narrative’s past or to trumpet its glorious future shrivel in the light of his meticulously thorough research, his rich use of example, and his tough, careful prose. Yet there is, or could be, a silver lining to our despair. To follow the development of the comic strip fully and fairly over four centuries, as Kunzle has enabled us to do, is to possess a clear picture of what the comic strip is and how it got to be that way. Such clarity, bleak as the retrospective view it provides might at first seem, should help us judge more soberly what to expect from the sequential art narrative in the future. Let us advocates adopt this sobriety as our governing attitude and survey our ward’s past, present, and future without confusion or alarm.

Perhaps the key element in our survey is the influence of audience. The comic strip—retaining Kunzle’s term for a moment—has been, throughout its history, a form appealing to the masses. And further: it is a form arising directly from the invention of mass media and unthinkable without them. Kunzle even cites mass reproducibility (initially on broadsheets) as one of his four criteria for determining what a comic strip is. (His other criteria as cited in Volume 1 are that the comic strip “must be a sequence of separate images,” that it must show “a preponderance of image over text,” and that it must “tell a story that is both

moral and topical" [2]. In Volume 2 he is obliged to broaden the last criterion to include the more familiar comic mode of the form.)

Like other forms arising from the masses (whatever the exact nature of those masses—peasantry, folk, bourgeoisie, lower middle class, and including, in the nineteenth century, children), the comic strip has been met with indifference and even at times with fear and hostility from higher, more educated groups. Yet while other forms with lowly origins have been able to bridge the gulf between classes and to invigorate artistic expression on the highest levels, the comic strip has not been able to do so. Why this indifference and contempt persist with respect to the comic strip after more than five centuries is a question very much in need of an answer. What is clear, however, is that this centuries-old attitude followed the comic strip from Europe to America. For while America has produced people whom one can without exaggeration call geniuses of comic strip art—Winsor McCay, creator of "Little Nemo," and George Herriman, creator of "Krazy Kat," come first to mind, though there are certainly others—the form in which McCay, Herriman, and others worked remains marginalized in prestige and restricted to a largely juvenile audience. Efforts by comic strip artists to break out of these barriers have proved either traumatic or inconclusive. The publication of Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 led to the institution of the Comics Code Authority and the freezing of what had promised to become an era of creative expression in comic art. Underground comics, pioneered by R. Crumb and others in the late 1960s, thawed the ice only temporarily and without affecting the glacial indifference of mainstream publishers and audiences. In fact, underground comics may even have thickened the ice by confirming the fear Dr. Wertham had played upon, that the comic strip is essentially a childishly anarchic, potentially subversive medium, incapable of governing its influence over the unformed intellects of its audience, and therefore requiring adult control and, if need be, suppression.

Yet now, in 1994, the centuries-old barrier between the comic strip and respectability, while still intact, shows signs of crumbling. Or at least it can be said that it has been breached more often and by a wider array of voices than ever before. Some of these voices come from within the comics world itself. Since the publication of Will Eisner's graphic novel *Contract with God* in 1978, there has been a great increase in the amount and quality of the work done in the sequential art narrative form by artists publishing their work with small presses and operating independently of the large comic book studios run by Marvel and DC. Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* series (self-published initially, later reprinted by Doubleday in 1986 and 1987), Jack Jackson's *Los Tejanos* (Fantagraphics, 1982), James Vance and Dan Burr's *Kings in Disguise* (Kitchen Sink, 1990), Dave Sim's *Cerebus* series (Aardvark-Vanaheim, 1977 to the present), Will Eisner's *To the Heart of the Storm* (Kitchen Sink, 1991) and *Invisible People* (Kitchen Sink, 1993), and the

already-mentioned *Maus* (self-published initially, later reprinted by Pantheon in 1986 and 1991) are among the noteworthy titles. Other voices advocating the sequential art narrative come from outside the comics world, from a source traditionally thought hostile to it: the nations' high school librarians. They recognize, and many teachers are beginning to follow their lead, that for the current generation of students, the high-quality sequential art narrative provides an attractive and worthwhile alternative to the text-only book. And not just for high school students. We see more and more evidence that visual learning, stimulated by developments in computer and communications technology, will play a dominant role in people's understanding of themselves and of their own and each other's cultures. Such an emphasis is likely not merely to challenge the centuries-old prejudice against the sequential art narrative, but to overwhelm it.

Yet another sign is the growing number of academic books devoted to the study of comic art. Kunzle's work is published by the University of California Press, and the University Press of Mississippi's Studies in Popular Culture Series, under the editorship of M. Thomas Inge, has been publishing strong work in this new field. Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (1989) and Inge's own *Comics as Culture* (1990) are thoughtful, well-researched, and informative.

A more popular historical study is Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics: An Introduction*. Sabin doesn't "close read" individual works, nor does he place the sequential art narrative within larger cultural developments; and as a historical account, his work is not in the same class as Kunzle's. His special strength is his skeptical resistance to what he calls the "hyping" of the sequential art narrative during the middle and late 1980s by a novelty-craving media. According to Sabin, publishers and journalists tried at that time to create the expectation, based on the strong sales figures and respectful reviews of *Maus* and two other graphic works, *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons and *Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller, of an imminent breakthrough of the sequential art narrative into the trade book market. Their fond hope, says Sabin, was that the sequential art narrative would "take over the prose novel as the reading matter for a post-literate society" (94). Sabin is shrewd in analyzing the reasons why such a "takeover" did not occur, citing marketing miscalculations and greed as the main culprits. But his skepticism is colored by a curious lack of enthusiasm for the subject of his book. The sequential art narrative may not be, he says reasonably, "the inexorable future of literature." But then he adds: "it may not even be the future of comics" (250). The circularity is breathtaking. If the sequential art narrative, however it is more narrowly defined, as graphic memoir, graphic history, or graphic novel, is not to look for itself in its own future, what else is it supposed to see? Sabin offers no clue. He concludes by suggesting, with a somewhat weary resignation, that we

should “enjoy adult comics for what they are, rather than for what some quarters would like us to think they are” (250).

But what *are* they? Sabin’s study, like all others until quite recently, is limited by a remoteness of approach. In almost all such work, the sequential art narrative, whether broadsheet, comic strip, comic book, graphic memoir, graphic history, or graphic novel, is seen chronologically, its development keyed to larger cultural forces. Valuable as such analyses are, they beg the question of why the comics medium is worth studying in the first place, except as an indicator of popular culture’s changes of taste and expression. Even studies devoted to an aesthetic appreciation of graphic narratives are hampered by dependence on techniques and terminology borrowed from other fields, such as literary criticism; Witek’s careful, intelligent “close reading” of three serious graphic historians is a case in point. Until recently there has been no concerted attempt to find or invent a language to describe the sequential art narrative’s special powers. And without such a language it has been difficult to be clear about what the sequential art narrative really is. We go back to the dilemma dramatized at the beginning of this review: who *is* this suddenly grown-up child standing before us, demanding understanding as something other than the projected image of ourselves?

Fortunately for sequential art narrative advocates, this challenge has been met in two recent publications, one building on the other. The first of these is by Will Eisner himself, the inventor of the graphic novel in its modern form. Eisner’s *Comics & Sequential Art* is the first work to analyze the workings of the sequential art narrative from the inside, using its own techniques as terms of reference. Eisner’s work is accordingly focused on discussion of “timing” and especially of “the frame.” The “frame”—by which Eisner means the choice of the individual “panel” in its relation to other panels on the same page—receives Eisner’s special attention because it is this device that drives the sequential art narrative. Knowing how to manipulate the framing of an action to convey not only tempo but also the emotional state suggested by or prompting the action is every sequential art narrative artist’s challenge, and how artfully the challenge is met determines the success of the work. Eisner’s discussion of this subject is unsurpassed. His book is already referred to as the sequential art narrative artist’s “bible,” for it articulates the questions every artist must confront as he or she stares at the empty page tacked to the drawing board. Yet, alas, that same artist may find him or herself no less intimidated by Eisner’s bible than by the blank sheet of drawing paper. The examples Eisner uses to illustrate solutions to the various framing problems he defines are taken from his own work. As the acknowledged master of page layout, Eisner sets a standard out of reach of most practitioners.

Even if we feel no sympathy for the weak-willed or untalented, however, we must still recognize the limitation of *Comics & Sequential Art*: its audience is

primarily other admiring artists. (The book itself stems from Eisner's years of teaching courses in Sequential Art at New York's School of Applied Arts.) But what of the audience for Eisner's own work and that of the artists he has inspired? Who will help this audience understand their reading and viewing of a sequential art narrative as a distinct kind of aesthetic experience? Who will provide them with a perceptual theory to guide their appreciation of what can be accomplished in this medium that cannot be accomplished as well in texts or in graphic art alone or even in cinema? Who will persuade them that the sequential art narrative is not a hybrid medium but a self-sustaining art form, the equal of the other arts? Who will show them that the sequential art narrative is no dependent teen but a form of expression possessing an independent adult identity?

The savior has arrived, and his name is Scott McCloud. Will Eisner himself says (in an endorsement on the back cover) that McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is "a landmark dissection and intellectual consideration of comics as a valid medium." *Understanding Comics* is also an excellent demonstration of what it analyzes, for it is a visual narrative about the visual narrative form. The narrator is constantly visible to us as a cartoon version of McCloud, and his demonstration of his points—for he lectures us throughout "like a tenured modernist," as Gary Trudeau puts it admiringly in the *New York Times Book Review* of 13 March 1994—is conducted within the very medium in which he exists. McCloud's narrative persona is both outside and inside his subject at the same time, making points about it verbally and acting out those points visibly on and in himself, or in the panel backgrounds against which he lectures, or in panel frames or speech balloons, or wherever else he asks us to look in his survey of the unique powers of the comics world. It is a case of a lecturer's putting his money where his mouth is—a tactic that gives his discussion an authority lacking in analyses conducted solely in text. The tactic also gives authority to the visual narrative form itself by showing that it can be used in a sophisticatedly self-referential way.

The authority thus gained for both messenger and form is put at the service of a truly bold and generous spirit. It is bold because McCloud isn't afraid to tackle the thorniest theoretical questions in his zeal to establish what he sees as the unique power and dignity of the comics medium. It is generous because his manner in making his many broad claims for the medium is unfailingly open, cheerful, and modest, untainted by resentment or defensiveness. Every panel and page of *Understanding Comics* is meant to be inviting to the eye and to the mind. Disagreement is not only allowed, it is expected, since McCloud assumes, in his charming way, that we would disagree only constructively. He expects us to be fellow-pioneers clearing ground for the graphic narrative. "This book is meant to stimulate debate, not to settle it," he tells us. "I've had my say. Now it's *your* turn" (216). Who could resist such a warm appeal? We seem to have entered a greener and fresher world, one freed of the sniping and hostility that greets, or repels us,



in much (too much) theoretical discourse. We seem able to breathe freely, to argue points disinterestedly, without fear that our own egos or the egos of our fellow enthusiasts will poison the air between us.

This warmth of approach is consistent with McCloud's vision of every aspect of the comics medium, from its technical aspects to its historical origins and to what he sees as its cultural mission. Where before there was division, McCloud sees or foresees unity. Each chapter is dedicated to showing how this unity, whether between word and image, between viewer and artist, or between culture and individual, is or will be established in and by the comics medium. For ultimately, McCloud believes, that medium will enable us to heal what he considers to be a split in Western consciousness brought about by the invention of printing, a split which divided words and pictures into separate realms. (We recall that for Kunzle the invention of printing enabled the comics medium to arise in the first place.) McCloud may be a cartoon character, he may be modest and self-deprecating as only cartoon characters can be, with their traditions of pratfalls and absurd comeuppances, but he is at the same time every inch a prophet leading us into an irresistibly attractive promised land.

Yet our sober self must ask: is this role of cartoon prophet sustainable? Doesn't its apparent self-contradiction cause it to fall apart? And what of the predictions of unity? Aren't they absurdly grandiose? Sobriety must have its day. McCloud's prophetic reach has, I think, exceeded his grasp. But not by much. The result of the overreaching is no ignominious tumble on his own banana peel. Building on Eisner's *Comics & Sequential Art*, McCloud has amplified brilliantly the discussion of the language of comics: of icon, closure, frame, and line. Gary Trudeau is right when he says in his review that "most readers will find it difficult to look at comics in quite the same way ever again." *Understanding Comics* educates the eye as no other work on the comics medium has done. And having done that much, it has done a very great deal. If we say it falls short of achieving clarity in all areas, this is not to find fault with the book, but to take seriously the author's own earnest request that we take an active part in the project. The part we take will perhaps extend the boundaries of this old yet refreshingly new medium. And it is to the extension of these boundaries that McCloud has dedicated his work.

My own choice would be to address McCloud's perhaps oversimplified view of how words and pictures are connected. In one sense, this issue is a tangential one, since McCloud's definition of comics does not mention words. For him, comics are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequences, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). Yet in almost all subsequent demonstrations and discussions, he shows us words working with pictures. Since their conjunction seems inescapable, it is important to be clear about just what each of them is, so that we can better judge what could or should happen when they come together. McCloud claims

that they come together naturally since they are essentially the same kind of thing. For example, in his second chapter, "The Vocabulary of Comics," he arranges a series of faces in order from one rendered in realistic style to one rendered schematically or, in McCloud's special use of the term, "iconically." His point is to show that as we strip away the lines that constitute a realistic portrait, the faces become more and more like those of comic book characters—simpler, more like masks, more easily appropriated by viewers as "icons" of themselves, more and more (literally) abstract. The discussion up to this point, a discussion whose main points are acted out before us on the book's pages, seems to me wonderfully cogent and enlightening. Yet McCloud's next step is a very debatable one. Just after the most abstract (or "iconic") of the faces, he puts a scattering of vertical and horizontal lines to which he wants us to add other lines in order to produce the word "face." (This game will be familiar to us from the puzzle books we give our children when they're sick or which we ourselves received during long-ago bouts with mumps and measles.) The device is delightful, but not persuasive. The word "face" is not simply the next step in abstraction from the most abstract pictorial face we can imagine. A unity of words and pictures is not to be achieved so easily. I would argue that it is not to be achieved at all, that words and pictures derive their meaning in different ways because they are different things.

Different, but not unrelated, nor unrelatable. The question is, what is the exact nature of their relationship? The question is not academic, or not only academic. It goes to the heart of a great cultural issue. We live, it has been said—I have said it myself above—in an increasingly visual environment. It is an environment our students live in more fully than we, their teachers. It is one they will not only inherit but will enhance and transform. In such a world, the problem of how words and pictures connect is a vital one. And no artistic medium seems to me as properly suited to the working out of the connection as the visual narrative is. It is itself the meeting ground of words and pictures. Its immediate accessibility and popularity ought—rather than devaluing it—to recommend it. Recommending it, too, is its affordability (its production requires nothing like the vast sums needed for video and cinematic work) and its individuality (its production requires only a pad of paper, a pen, a bottle of ink, and a dedicated artist). The comics narrative offers itself as a means of cultural self-analysis uniquely suited to our time.

Readers of *College English* whose skepticism toward the sequential art narrative might be weakening should get hold of *Understanding Comics* and judge for themselves whether it would serve as the introductory work in a course analyzing not only other sequential art narratives but narratives of other sorts as well. *Understanding Comics* provides and enacts a vocabulary of analysis that is engaging and highly useful, especially as applied to other graphic works. Where that

vocabulary needs sharpening, in its application to the ways words mean, will be evident to engaged students. And because the graphic format and McCloud's friendly tone invite such discussion, they will feel uninhibited about asking the question, just how is a word different from a picture? Or better: what special strength is obtained, a strength available to neither alone, when word and picture are brought together? If this last question must be asked with special emphasis in our era, I can think of no better stimulus for informed discussion than *Understanding Comics*.